FICHTE'S TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking is doing.

Joseph Beuys

In 1800 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then thirty-seven years of age and without a post after having lost his professorship at the University of Jena over charges of atheism during the previous year, published a treatise whose title can suitably be placed over its author's entire oeuvre: *Die Bestimmung des Menschen,* customarily translated as "The Vocation of Man," but perhaps best rendered in English as "The Destination of Humanity." The key word of the work's German title, "*Bestimmung,*" can mean both "determination," in the sense of an imposed limitation, and "calling" or "vocation," indicating the goal of some pursuit. Fichte's employment of the term in its finitist-finalist double meaning addresses the tension between what is fixed or given in human existence and what is open and yet to be realized about it. As Fichte sees it, the goal for which human beings are destined is not given to them like a determination that would limit them from the outside. Rather, the destination of the human being is precisely the freedom from all determinations except the ones that the human being gives to itself freely. Determination is to become self-determination, facticity is to be worked off through freedom.

Fichte's basic belief in the supreme value of free self-determination runs through virtually his entire life and works, manifesting itself in his notoriously controversial public persona as well as his philosophical thinking on

such diverse subjects as politics, law, ethics and religion. It was the cause of freedom that attracted him to the early phase of the French revolution just as it motivated his participation in Prussia's uprising against Napoleon's rule over Europe. The pursuit of freedom also underlies Fichte's pioneering defense of the liberal state and informs his moral theory of radical autonomy. Even Fichte's philosophical reflections on religion feature prominently the role of free recognition in the relation to the absolute.

Fichte's championship of freedom and self-determination is not limited to his public personality and his work in practical philosophy. It also animates and sustains his highly abstract and exceedingly demanding philosophical speculations on the origin, the limits and the objects of human knowledge, which he undertook over a twenty-year period under the working title *Wissenschaftslehre,* literally "Doctrine of Science" or "Doctrine of Knowledge."[1] Historically speaking, Fichte's project of a *Wissenschaftslehre* continues Kant's development of a transcendental philosophy; it aims at a comprehensive account of the principles governing human knowledge and its world of objects. Fichte locates freedom at the very core of human knowledge, thereby putting into question the rigid distinction between knowing and doing, or theory and practice. To be sure, the freedom that is part of the transcendental conditions of all human knowledge is not the freedom involved in deliberation and choice. Freedom as a transcendental condition of knowledge and its objects is spontaneity and as such the root of all other, overt forms of freedom.

Fichte's development of the transcendental theory of knowledge and its objects as a theory of freedom offers an intriguing but also highly puzzling combination of theoretical rigor and practical fervor. His writings on the *Wissenschaftslehre* show extreme technical detail of an extent and complexity unknown in philosophy up to that point. But they also exhibit a sustained concern with broader, more general issues, most notably with the prefiguration of the overtly practical dimension of freedom in the transcendental foundation of knowledge. In fact, the first and philosophically most important and influential period of the two decades that Fichte devoted to the *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–1800) centers around the systematic attempt to vindicate freedom to the domain of transcendental philosophy. Fichte himself expresses the novelty of according a central status to freedom in philosophy as a whole by claiming to have provided "the first system of freedom."[2]

The systematic prominence of the speculative foundations of freedom in the *Wissenschaftslehre* goes together with a radical reevaluation of the relation between theoretical and practical philosophy in Fichte. More importantly, the respective object domains of these philosophical disciplines – knowing and doing – undergo a reevaluation as well. Fichte's novel thinking about the relation between the theoretical and the practical is

most prominent in his account of the two key features that make up human rationality, viz., intelligence and will. In his redrawing of the borders between the cognitive and the conative, Fichte emphasizes the practical aspects of knowing as well as the theoretical aspects of willing. Yet while implicating intelligence and will in each other to a considerable degree, Fichte is careful not to collapse their distinction. Rather than simply identifying the two, he works out their original proximity, thus maintaining a delicate balance between unity and division, which he himself addresses as the mind's "duplicity" and specifically "original duplicity" (*ursprüngliche Duplizität*).[3]

The dual unity or unitary duality of intelligence and will in the *Wissenschaftslehre* thus provides a key to Fichte's overall project of integrating a transcendental theory of knowledge and a transcendental theory of freedom into a comprehensive account of the principal structures and strictures of human reason. And since on a transcendental account such as Fichte's the principal conditions of knowing and willing are also the principal conditions of the world of objects of such knowing and willing, Fichte's integrated double theory of intelligence and will also provides a principal account of the objects involved in thinking and willing. Indeed, much of that first, most influential phase of Fichte's work on the *Wissenschaftslehre* is a systematic attempt to trace the overt distinctions between the worlds of theory and practice, of knowing and doing, to their complex yet unitary ground in an intelligence that is also practical.

As a transcendental theory of the practical intelligence, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is mainly concerned with the nature and status of the acts and objects of that intelligence. For Fichte, intelligence and will are not, at least not primarily or originally, psychological abilities. Rather, they are considered to be the basic ways in which the human being exists. Moreover, Fichte emphasizes the active as well as the productive nature of thinking and willing: Intelligence and will are the principal ways in which the human being exists through its own doing and making – either as theoretical, cognitive activity or as practical, volitional activity. Finally, the dynamism of the self-constitution of the practical intelligence is coupled with a productionism regarding the objects of knowing and willing.

Yet the radically idealist orientation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is counterbalanced by a thoroughgoing concern with the reality that the acts and objects of the practical intelligence have. Fichte seeks to elucidate the role of the given as the material basis and the ineliminable restraint on any making and producing through the practical intelligence. In addition, he stresses that the intelligent and practical activity is restrained internally, through the universal laws that govern it. In line with his basic point about the mutual involvement of the theoretical and the practical, Fichte is particularly attentive to the practical core of cognition in the form of feeling

and to the cognitive core of volition in the recognition of some guiding law that is integral to the will.

The complex interplay of intelligence and will in Fichte's transcendental double theory of knowledge and freedom emerges gradually over the course of his lecturing and publication activities in Jena (1794–1799) and their afterlude during his first year in Berlin (1799–1800). The terminological and philosophical development of Fichte's systematic transcendental philosophy reaches from the first published presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–1795), through its radically revised presentation in several lecture courses and related publications (1796–1799) to its masterly restatement under a less technical, more popular guise in *The Vocation of Man* (1800).

During this time period Fichte resorts with increasing frequency and subtle modifications to the distinction between the real and the ideal in order to capture the relation between intelligence and will. Over the course of those years, the ideal assumes the double function of the (retentive) cognition of what is and the (protentive) cognition of what ought to be. Analogously, the real comes to stand both for the objects of the already existing empirical world and for the yet to be brought about objects of willing. The mutual implication of will and intellect – that willing involves thinking and that thinking involves willing – is mirrored in the double roles of the ideal and the real. That which is ideal in the practical sense – the goal of rational willing – is also that which is *truly* real, whereas that which is real by the standards of theoretical cognition – the objects of experience – is also that which is *merely* ideal.

The emergence of a practical, volitional sense of the ideal in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* terminates in a conception of purely rational volition ("pure will"), which, although not empirically real, has the reality of an entity of necessary thinking, that is, of a noumenon. According to Fichte, that which can only be thought – and which moreover must be so thought – has a reality far more substantial *in a practical regard* than the one possessed by the objects of theoretical cognition. And yet Fichte's practical idealism-realism with its emphasis on pure willing as that which is most real rests on the very *thinking* of such a will; it is the intellect through and for which such a being has its reality or, for that matter, ideality. The mutual implication of intelligence and will remains. Something real that would not also be an object of thought, that would not be subject to the latter's conditions and forms, would be nothing to us. It is at this point in the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that Fichte realizes the need to supplement the account of intelligent and practical activity given so far with an account of the unthinkable ground of all thinking and willing, alternatively identified as "infinite will" in the popular language of *The Vocation of Man* or as "the absolute" in the terminology of the later *Wissenschaftslehre.*

The following chapters provide a detailed reconstruction of Fichte's sustained reflections on intelligence and will, theory and practice, the real and the ideal, as well as their complex relationships. Fichte's thinking on the matter is traced from the beginnings of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and its methodological specifics through the core doctrines of two of its magisterial presentations right to the threshold of the late *Wissenschaftslehre* with its problematic turn of Fichte's thinking toward the unthinkable. In the process, the chapters cover much of his main writings from the philosophically most influential phase of his philosophical career. In their entirety, the chapters seek to provide an account of Fichte's theory of theoretical and practical reason that locates him in the systematic tradition of transcendental philosophy.

By focusing on the fundamental role of willing and the precariously close relation between thinking and willing in Fichte, this reading seeks to identify his original position in the post-Kantian debate about the unitary structure of subjectivity. Fichte's insistence on the twofold origin or originary duplicity of the human mind avoids both reductive simplification and additive pluralization in accounting for the transcendental conditions of human mental life. His emphasis on the mutual implication of the two key constituents of human subjectivity provides an original model for dynamic conceptions of selfhood. Finally, Fichte's increased recognition of the ultimate instability of subjectivity so conceived, and the need he perceived to ground the subject in something else and entirely unlike itself, makes him the first to carry the conception of radically self-sufficient subjectivity, which he himself pioneered, to its limits and to start exploring in systematic form a radically different conception of the subject's ultimate ground.

The proposed Kantian reading of Fichte as a transcendental philosopher intent on vindicating freedom to the theory of the principles of knowledge and its objects is meant to supplement other recent attempts in Continental and Anglo-American scholarship at retrieving the philosophical potential of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Those approaches have tended to stress Fichte's contributions to the theory of self-consciousness (Henrich, Neuhouser, Pippin), his pioneering development of a theory of interpersonality (Lauth, Philonenko, Radrizzani), his innovations in practical philosophy (Verweyen, Wood), his engagement of skepticism and relation to the early post-Kantians (Breazeale) and his position in relation to Schelling and Hegel (Girndt, Siep, Baumanns, Lauth). In building on much of that recent literature, the present work addresses the major, first phase of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole, focusing on Fichte's systematic contribution to the transcendental project in general and his transcendental theory of thinking and willing in particular. In so doing, special attention is paid to the interplay between substantial, doctrinal specifics and methodological,

metaphilosophical considerations in Fichte. The goal is to present Fichte's sustained and probing thinking about the nature of self and world in its most powerful and original aspects – and to do so in clear and concise language that preserves the specific details and overall context of his distinctions and doctrines. As any reader of Fichte knows, criticizing him comes easy; the hard part is making him intelligible.

A distinctive feature of the present approach to Fichte is its orientation toward the second or "new presentation" (*neue Darstellung*) of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (1796–1799), which is viewed here as the crowning achievement of Fichte's Jena years. By contrast, the earlier, first and only detailed, presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* published by Fichte himself, the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–95), which for a long time has been the standard version of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* emerges as an initial version that was immediately improved upon by Fichte himself. To be sure, the complete presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo,* as the new presentation was called in Fichte's Latin course announcements, is preserved only in two student lecture transcripts.[4] But between them, they afford a reliable and surprisingly clear picture of Fichte's new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* confirmed and supplemented by his own publications on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from the same period.

The growing recognition of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* among scholars and students of Fichte's thought is reflected in the appearance of translations of that work into Italian, Spanish, French and English,[5] the recent publication of a succinct French commentary on the text,[6] its increased use in surveys and general treatments of Fichte's work,[7] as well as a conference, a collection of essays and a journal issue devoted to it.[8] Yet so far there has been no book-length treatment of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* in English, nor has there been an in-depth study of this work's core concern with the relation of thinking and willing in any language. The present study is designed to fill this lacuna.

With its focus on intelligence and will in Fichte's transcendental philosophy from the Jena years, the book has to forego discussion of important further aspects of his thinking before, during and after that time period. In particular, it was not possible to address in any detail Fichte's relation to philosophical precursors other than Kant and Jacobi or to address in any form his relation to his critics and successors, from Novalis and Hölderlin to Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Moreover, there is one major philosophical text by Fichte from the period under consideration that is not discussed in greater detail in the present study, viz., the first detailed presentation of the theory of interpersonality in the *Foundation of Natural Law* (1796–97). Although there is no arguing with the many interpreters of Fichte who view his account of the origin of individual consciousness in

interpersonal relations in general and his theory of recognition (*Anerkennung*) and solicitation (*Aufforderung*) in particular as major philosophical contributions to social philosophy, it is far from clear that Fichte's theory of interpersonality supplants his own conception of transcendental subjectivity. Rather than constituting a social ontology outside of individual consciousness and its transcendental conditions, interpersonality emerges within the confines of his transcendental theory of the subject.[9] For this reason, the study addresses the crucial but systematically subordinate role of interpersonality in the context of Fichte's theory of pure willing in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* without tracing the emergence and development of interpersonality in his earlier writings or addressing the important role of interpersonality in his social philosophy.[10]

The book's eight chapters are organized in four parts with two chapters each. Part I provides an orientation about Fichte's philosophical project in the *Wissenschaftslehre,* emphasizing the relation to Kant and methodological issues. Parts II and III examine the close connection between knowing and doing and between thinking and willing, respectively, in Fichte's transcendental philosophy. Part IV focuses on the crucial role that willing in general and pure willing in particular assume in Fichte.

More specifically, the first chapter examines Fichte's self-interpretation as heir to Kant's transcendental project. It shows how Fichte extends and deepens Kant's transcendental idealism through a sustained methodological reflection on the nature of idealism as a philosophical system. The chapter focuses on the distinction between philosophy or "speculation" and ordinary consciousness or "life" and argues for the reconstructive, model-like nature of Fichte's transcendental account of consciousness and its objects. The second chapter places his basic account of the I as the nonempirical ground of experience into the context of his philosophical procedure. The chapter explores Fichte's self-interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a scientific experiment conducted by the philosopher upon himself or herself.

The third chapter reconstructs Fichte's grounding of the distinction between theory and practice in the mind's deep structure with its characteristic activity of "positing." The chapter focuses on the origin of theoretical and practical determination in his account of the I as self-positing. The fourth chapter examines Fichte's account of the practical relation to the world by placing it in the systematic context of the *Wissenschaftslehre.* The stress here is on his theory of action and the transcendental function of the principle of morality.

The fifth chapter deals with Fichte's general account of the relation between thinking and willing. It shows how for Fichte willing is a form of thinking, and it addresses his conception of pure willing as what is ultimately real for the practical intelligence. The sixth chapter builds on this by recon-

structing Fichte's puzzling reconceptualization of knowing and doing as ideal thinking and real thinking, respectively.

The seventh chapter traces the development of Fichte's thinking about the will. The focus is on his distinction between deliberative and predeliberative willing and his adoption of the Kantian conception of pure will as pure practical reason. The concluding chapter relates Fichte's theory of the pure will to his account of the unity of thinking and willing. The emphasis is on the relation between the sensible and the intelligible world and on the systematic role of faith.

The main works by Fichte discussed in these chapters are the first major presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1794–95 (Chapter 3) and the second, radically revised, presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1796–99 (Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8). The treatment of those two main presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is supplemented by the discussion of several of Fichte's other writings from the period that expand the *Wissenschaftslehre* by providing introductory reflections on its methods and goals or by applying its principles and results to specific areas of philosophical inquiry. Among the further writings considered are the "Theory of the Will" added to the second edition of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* from 1793 (Chapter 7),[11] the programmatic brochure *On the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* from 1794 (Chapter 1), the two introductions to the new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1797–98 (Chapters 1 and 2) published by Fichte himself, *The System of Ethics* from 1798 (Chapters 4 and 7), *The Vocation of Man* from 1800 (Chapter 8) and the *Crystal Clear Report to the General Public concerning the Actual Essence of the Newest Philosophy* from 1801, although written for the most part in 1800 (Chapter 1).[12]

The book is intended for a dual, though hopefully not duplicitous, audience. To philosophically inclined readers who have never read or never understood Fichte, it may serve as a survey and advanced introduction that presupposes some knowledge of Kant but little or no knowledge of Fichte. To students and scholars already familiar with Fichte, it offers a unified interpretation under a guiding theme. But it might be an exaggeration to claim, with Fichte, that this book "ought to be intelligible to all readers who are able to understand a book at all."[13]